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OP-ED

A Bid to Chill Thinking

Behind Joe Barton's Assault on Climate Scientists

By David Ignatius
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In today's partisan political climate, science has inevitably become a political football. But I can't remember anything quite as nasty -- or as politically skewed -- as Rep. Joe Barton's recent attack on scientists whose views on global warming he doesn't like.

Barton, an 11-term Republican from Texas, is chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and one of the oil lobby's best friends on Capitol Hill. Late last month he fired off letters to professor Michael Mann of the University of Virginia and two other scientists demanding information about what he claimed were "methodological flaws and data errors" in their studies of global warming.

Barton's letters to the scientists had a peremptory, when-did-you-stop-beating-your-wife tone. Mann was told that within less than three weeks, he must list "all financial support you have received related to your research," provide "the location of all data archives relating to each published study for which you were an author," "provide all agreements relating to . . . underlying grants or funding," and deliver similarly detailed information in five other categories.

The scientists' offense was that they had authored a controversial study that reported a sharp rise in global temperatures during the 20th century, based on an analysis of tree rings, glacial ice and coral layers. The study was an important source for a 2001 report by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that argued the 1990s had been the hottest decade in 1,000 years. A graph summarizing the sharp upturn last century after hundreds of years of flat temperatures became known as the "hockey stick," and it has been derided ever since by skeptics.

There's certainly room for scientific debate about Mann's research. A front-page article in the Wall Street Journal on Feb. 14 cited a rebuttal by two Canadian scientists, focusing on Mann's alleged mathematical mistakes. But *other* scientists have noted that there is so much other evidence of global warming that even if Mann did make serious mistakes in his statistical calculations, it wouldn't change the scientific picture very much. "[I]ndependent groups, with different analysis methods, have arrived at similar results for the last millennium," climatologists Gavin Schmidt and Stefan Rahmstorf argue in a post on their Web site, RealClimate.org.

Barton's goal wasn't scientific clarity but political intimidation. That was the conclusion of Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, a New York Republican who chairs the House Committee on Science, which also claims jurisdiction on climate change issues. He wrote a blistering July 14 letter to Barton: "My primary concern about your investigation is that its purpose seems to be to intimidate scientists rather than to learn from them, and to substitute Congressional political review for scientific peer review. This would be pernicious." He added that the precedent set by this effort "to have Congress put its thumbs on the scales of a scientific debate" was "truly chilling."

The political mischief in Barton's probe is that it tries to fuzz the climate debate when a consensus is finally emerging that climate change is a serious global problem and one that is man-made. The national academies of science of 11 leading countries, including the United States and Britain, issued a joint declaration this year that "there is now strong evidence that significant global warming is occurring" and that the "scientific understanding of climate change is now sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action."

This growing scientific consensus prompted a "sense of the Senate" resolution last month that "greenhouse gases accumulating in the atmosphere are causing average temperatures to rise at a rate outside the range of natural variability," and that the problem is caused by "human activity." Another sign of the scientific clarity on the issue came yesterday when the Senate energy committee met with top climatologists and then expressed bipartisan support for taking action. Even President Bush agreed that the scientific evidence is solid by endorsing a Group of Eight communique this month that described climate change as "a serious and long-term challenge" and warning that human activities "contribute in large part to increases in greenhouse gases associated with the warming of our Earth's surface."

The strategy of Exxon Mobil and other business interests that resist action on global warming has been to maintain the notion that the scientific evidence is shaky. That strategy was outlined in a remarkable 1998 "Action Plan" prepared by business opponents of the Kyoto treaty, which argued: "Victory will be achieved when . . . average citizens 'understand' (recognize) uncertainties in climate science."

Barton's investigation may be a last roundhouse swing in this bash-the-science strategy. Perhaps it pleased energy and natural resource interests, which gave Barton \$523,099 in his 2004 congressional race, and Exxon Mobil, which has given him \$17,500 since 2001. But this battle is ending. A consensus is emerging among responsible Republicans and Democrats. The basic science on climate change isn't in doubt any more. The question is what to do about it.